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The Christian Church

What of Its Future

By

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Not many weeks or months had elapsed after this world war began before there was presented to our vision a picture so horrible it hardly seemed that it could be true.

It appeared that hell had broken loose and that millions of evil spirits had become incarnate in human form and were going about the earth committing atrocities and acts of cruelty beyond belief.

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In the face of this awful picture we heard it said on every hand, Christianity has failed!

The war has been going on for one year, two years, three years, and now it is in the fourth year. And another picture is presented before our eyes. In it we see millions of men and women who are exemplifying in their daily lives, in the most commonplace fashion, characteristics and qualities which command the admiration of the world.

First of all is a spirit of self-sacrifice and unselfishness. Whether it be on the battlefield or behind the lines, in the pestilence-ridden district or among the starving villagers, the thought is never of self, but always of the other man or woman.

We see charity exhibited, brotherly love, as it has never been manifested before. Whenever and wherever human need appears, the last crust is cheerfully shared, the last garment is gladly given to a more needy one.

And we see beautiful and countless examples of humility. Who will forget the story of the titled Belgian women? The man in charge of a food distribution depot in a certain Belgian city needed a number of women to work in the depot, scrubbing the floors, washing the dishes, and serving the food. He could find none to perform these menial tasks. He was directed to the house of a noble Belgian woman, but it seemed useless to apply there. However, he was told to do so, and as he entered he found gathered a group of titled women, working diligently, industriously for their

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fellow countrymen. He was asked to state his errand. And from that group there volunteered the necessary number of women to go to the food depot daily, scrub floors, wash dishes and do the other menial work required.

This same quality is exhibited as we see the son of the nobleman bivouacing with the son of the peasant and each finding that under the coat of the other beats an honest and manly heart. The real gentleman or gentlewoman in this great host is he or she who serves best and who serves most.

And again, the characteristic of generosity is manifested to a marvelous degree. Many people of means have long since been giving their entire income and in addition cutting deep into their principal. Those having moderate possessions are making great sacrifices to

meet the demands made upon them. And the poor, always most generous, are giving their all.

So, as we look at this picture, we say, "These people are leading the Christ-life, their inspiration comes from God." Yes, it is true, but many of them do not know it. We ask, "Of what church are they?" But the very thought gives them pause, for they regard the church as the abode of the "Better-than-thous," an organization in which men and women are gathered who profess one thing and from which they go out to live another. It is, from their viewpoint, an institution which has little sympathy with them or understanding of their problems.

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Donald Hankey speaks of these people as followers of "The Religion of the Inarticulate." Their religion is expressed in life, not in words.

With renewed faith we turn from the picture and say with confidence, "Christianity has not failed; the Church may have failed, but not Christianity! For never in the history of the world was Christianity a more vital force in human life than it is today."

In the presence of this great host of the followers of the Religion of the Inarticulate, who, broadly speaking, did not come forth from the church, although directly or indirectly all have been more or less influenced by it; many of whom have faced death, have lived a life far worse than death, have sacrificed their all, we ask, "What of the future of the Christian Church?"

Will these people, freed from the restraint of military discipline, which numbers of them have been under for years, released from the high tension of life, find in the church as it exists today the leadership, the guidance and the anchorage which they need and have a right to expect?

Regretfully we answer, "No." For the church does not speak their language; it does not understand their needs; it does not sympathize as it should and must with their problems.

If this be true, one of three things is inevitable:

First, this unorganized spiritual force which is silently dominating millions of lives will not be conserved, but will die. Such a thing is unthinkable; it cannot be;

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it must not be. For so mighty a force, born of bloodshed and suffering, if it can be preserved, if it can be nurtured, will more than repay the world in the days to come, for the sacrifice and loss of these awful years.

Second, the Religion of the Inarticulate will develop its own church, which will be the church of the future, finding its leaders among the laity; and if this happens, as is not impossible, it will be conclusive proof that the church of to-day has failed.

Third, the church must have a new birth and be reorganized to meet this marvelous opportunity and great human need. This last alternative is the right, logical and natural solution of the problem. It must be realized, and the responsibility therefor rests upon each member of the Christian Church.

Let us picture for a moment what this reborn church would be.

It would be called the Church of the Living God.

Its terms of admission would be love for God, as He is revealed in Christ and His living spirit, and the vital translation of this love into a Christ-like life.

Its atmosphere would be one of warmth, freedom and joy, so sympathetically and distinctly manifest as to attract and win into its fellowship the followers of the Religion of the Inarticulate.

It would pronounce ordinance, ritual, creed, all non-essential for admission into the Kingdom of God or His Church.

A life, not a creed, would be its test; what a man does, not what he professes; what he is, not what he has.

Its object would be to promote applied religion, not theoretical religion. This

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would involve its sympathetic interest in all of the great problems of human life; in social and moral problems, those of industry and business, the civic and educational problems; in all such as touch the life of man.

As its first concern, it would encourage Christian living seven days a week, fifty-two weeks in the year, rather than speculation about the hereafter.

It would be the church of all the people, of everyone who is fighting sin and trying to establish righteousness; the church of the rich and the poor, the wise and the ignorant, the high and the low—a true democracy.

Its ministers would be trained not only in the seminary, but quite as much in life, with the supreme emphasis on life. For it would be an important part of the preparation of each that he should

spend months, years possibly, working with his hands in the fields or the shop, doing business in the store or the office, so that he might not have merely a laboratory acquaintance with the problems of human life, but the practical knowledge which alone comes from actual experience and contact with them.

Yes, the ministry of this church would live in vital touch with humanity; it would understand and sympathize with human difficulties, and would exert its influence as much in living as in preaching.

Would that I had the power to bring to your minds the vision as it unfolds before me!

I see all denominational emphasis set aside.

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I see co-operation, not competition.

In the large cities I see great religious centers, wisely located, adequately equipped, strongly supported and inspiring their members to participation in all community matters.

In smaller places, instead of half a dozen dying churches, competing with each other, I see one or two strong churches, uniting the Christian life of the town; great economy in plant, in money, in service, in leadership; money enough saved in this way to support adequately home and foreign missions.

I see the church moulding the thought of the world as it has never done before, leading in all great movements as it should.

I see it literally establishing the Kingdom of God on earth.

Shall this vision be realized? The

future of the Christian Church depends on the answer Christian men and women give to that question.

We have been considering the demand for a united Christian Church from the point of view of the world's need for Christian leadership. There is another motive, not less compelling, urging the churches on toward that end. In the Germans and the Allies we may find an analogy that makes this necessity clear.

Whatever we may think of the motive that actuates Germany in this great war, there is one fact in the German situation which commands our admiration—that is the perfect co-operation in which the whole nation is working, every individual interest and desire being sub-

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ordinated to the one great object for which the nation is fighting.

The Allies, on the other hand, because of the unavoidable lack, at the outset, of close co-operation and subordination of the interests of each to the common interests of all, have in consequence, sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives and billions of dollars which otherwise might have been saved.

Do we not find a close parallel here to the eternal warfare which is being waged between the forces of evil and the many branches of the Christian Church? The former, like the Germans, always stand in a solid, unbroken phalanx, ever ready for any onslaught; while the latter, like the Allies, although headed toward a common goal, are often so preoccupied with their individual interests and petty differences that their attack upon the

common foe is not united, is less effective and more extravagant in its use of the sinews of war.

The Allies are coming rapidly to realize that national interests must be forgotten or at least subordinated and every ounce of strength and nerve thrown into the common cause, if the victory is to be won. So Christian men must come to see that only by the fullest co-operation and the withdrawal of emphasis from all non-essentials can the many branches of the Christian Church, standing together on the common ground of Christianity, hope for victory in this great warfare against sin.

When Christ came into the world he found the church loaded down with ritual and formalism. Every minutest

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detail of daily life was regulated by religious enactment. In the eyes of the church the most religious man was not he who gave to the poor, who helped the unfortunate, who was unselfish, meek and lowly, but he who kept most punctiliously every jot and tittle of the law. The spirit of worship had been displaced by empty form.

To establish spiritual righteousness in the world, to build up an internal rather than an external religion, to emphasize the responsibility of the individual to his Maker, that was Christ's mission on earth.

Few and simple were the forms He set up or sanctioned, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, but they were wonderfully beautiful and filled with sacred inspiration.

Baptism, typifying the washing away

of sin by the baptismal waters and a re-birth into newness of life in Christ, is an ordinance of profound symbolic meaning and one of great helpfulness to many people. Christ himself was baptized; He preached baptism; He commanded His disciples to baptize; He regarded baptism as an expression of affection between the soul and the Saviour. He did not, however, make it a condition of church membership, as is commonly assumed, or look upon it as an act relating the believer to the church; nor did His disciples. Baptism was made the door of the church by man, such action being based on inferences from the words of Christ and His disciples.

The Lord's Supper, typifying our assimilating Christ's very body and blood, that we may be more like Him, is also an ordinance rich in symbolic beauty. Far

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be it from any true follower of Christ to minimize the spiritual value of these symbols. In this day of materialism they should be preserved and guarded with increasing jealousy, for they foster the idealism of our religion.

In the face of the great problems of sin and evil with which the world is confronted today, can we imagine that were Christ to come to earth again He would regard the observance or non-observance of these and other ordinances and individual beliefs, or the manner in which they are observed, as of sufficient importance to justify the separation into rival factions of good men, all members of His spiritual kingdom, and controversy among them about doctrines?

Can we fancy Him giving His approval to such a course, which results too often in relaxing the warfare against

the common enemy, sin, to oppose which Christ came to earth, and in causing men to forget their common responsibility, the needy brother, to help whom Christ gave Himself so constantly?

Let ordinance, creed, ritual, form, biblical interpretation, theology, all be used to enrich worship, or to bring the believer into a fuller understanding of Him whom we worship, as each individual or separate church may find them helpful toward that end. But God forbid that they should ever, any of them, divert the attention from or be regarded as a substitute for that personal, spiritual relation between the soul and its God which is the essence of true religion.

God forbid that they should ever, any of them, be allowed to cause divisions among the followers of Christ or be set

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up as barriers at the door of any branch of the Church of the Living God.

What the world craves today is a more spiritual and less formal religion. To the man or woman facing death, great conflict, the big problems of human life, the forms of religion are a hollow mockery, the spirit an impregnable fortress.

I plead not for a modification of form but for its subordination to the spirit; not for the abolishing of ordinances, but for their voluntary rather than obligatory observance; not that these solemn rites should be set aside, but that they should be entered into as a sacred privilege, an act of loving consecration, rather than submitted to as an enforceable law. So and so only will their real

beauty and meaning be understood and their true purpose realized.

As we face, then, the world's need of great spiritual leadership, that humanity may be brought into vital, daily relationship with a living God, and that all the forces of righteousness may be united in an eternal warfare against the forces of evil, we ask again the question—"What of the future of the Christian Church?" This is the answer which I give you:

If the various divisions of the church as it is organized today catch the vision, have the breadth, the tolerance, the courage, and, setting aside all non-essentials, all barriers, will stand upon the bedrock principles of God's love and

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Christ's living spirit, **"not satisfied until the church is the church of all good men and women, until all good thoughts and deeds are laid at the feet of the Lord of all good life,"* the Church of the Living God will come into being, ushering in a new era of Christian unity.

What an opportunity! What a privilege! What a duty! In God's name I ask, does anyone dare let it pass?

*From "A Student in Arms," by Donald Hankey

